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ABSTRACT

In response to the increased number of casualties, "burn-outs" and relapses among alcohol counselors, the author maintains that large numbers of entering counselors lack the personal and professional skills needed to become quality counselors in the field. Some enter the field with insincere motives -- martyrs looking for souls to save. Others cannot tolerate the stress. Persons who become counselors on alcoholism through personal and professional experience stand a better chance at becoming quality counselors in the field. Usually they are recovered alcoholics who practice A.A. principles and who have developed a "forever student" attitude about their role in the alcoholism profession. (NWS)

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WHAT MAKES A GOOD ALCOHOL COUNSELOR?

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In our search to improve services to clients suffering from acute alcohol problems, we must try a little self-examination of our own programs from time to time. The problems of lack of counselor identification with clients, staff burn-out syndrome and other factors are very important to all programs. And, just as some teachers in the school systems view "teaching" as something done out of a book, to which students must conform, so do some counselors feel that "counseling" must involve a set of words that must always be uniform regardless of the unique problems of the individual.

The following article, of interest to many DSN readers, has been excerpted from a recent issue of the AHHAP Newsletter, published by the Association of Halfway House Alcoholism Programs of North America. It was written by Diane Fontaine, AHHAP staff member.

ORIGINALLY, the term "Counselor on Alcoholism" had one specific meaning that the holder of this title was a recovered alcoholic. This choice of name was coined by the recovered alcoholics as being a more professional description of their work than the terms "Alcoholic Counselor" or an "Alcoholism Counselor." The term "Counselor on Alcoholism" indicated the special qualities, abilities, training, and experiences of the individual holder of the title; and his or her endeavors in helping alcoholics and their families.

At several state-wide gatherings recently, counselors in the field of alcoholism held discussions on current issues of concern. One of the major topics at each of these gatherings was the increased casuality rate; burn-outs or relapses of fellow counselors.

Reactions and responses ranged from stunned amazement and perplexity to concerned hostility and anger that such things had happened. One suggestion that was offered as a solution was to "rotate counselors from one setting to another." I cringed when I head that one. It is one of those "flight or fight" solutions to a situation, and this suggestion fell in the category of of "flight." A closer examination of the field itself reveals the roots of the problem at hand.

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First, I believe one must look at the way in which counselors are entering the field. How do they acquire the title "Counselor?" (I make my first point); Many are not Counselors on Alcoholism and Drug Addiction, but something quite different. These persons are "Counselors" by virtue of their *employment* position!

COUNSELORS BY EMPLOYMENT: For instance; an employee of the Employment Office has a good reapport with all people. Along the way, this employee takes a course on alcoholism and drug abuse. The Supervisor at work learns of this and begins to channel alcoholics and drug users to this employee for assistance with job placements. The employee has successful dealings and makes placements; first because he or she is good at their work – second, the course may have provided this individual with a higher awareness level and some understanding of the problems of alcoholism.

In this process, the supervisor recognizes the work and initiates a newly created position with the title of "Counselor." Later on, in this individuals work career, through promotion, or through change of jobs, he or she may find themselves in counselor postions that are more demanding and involves *direct* counseling with individuals with their alcoholism and personal problems. The Counselor is ill-equipped and in time, must either leave the job or bear the pressures and stress of this situation.

"Peter's Principle" has now become effective. The person has progressed in a career situation until he or she has reached a *level of incompetence.*

He (she) was competent as an employee in the Employment field and possessed the required skills, training and experiences. Now as a Counselor in a hospital, treatment center, etc., he (she) is incompetent because of lack of other necessary skills, training and experience.

Should this individual acquire these additional skills and training, he may still not be competent in this newer area. The reason: his (her) personality, emotional and psychological makeup may not stand the test of time and increased stress situations.

One can apply this same description to other persons from other disciplines: clerks, group leaders, or receptionists from welfare agencies, social organizations, recreational settings; nurses, doctors in hospitals; professors, mechanics, housewives, clergy, A.A., etc, – anybody who for one reason or another aspires to enter the alcoholism field. Each has his own set of talents to bring to the field, but not *all* have the internal fortitude to stay in when the going gets rough.

SABBATICAL COUNSELORS: This group of Counselors is made up of individuals from the respective professional disciplines. One fact is certain; their previous professional status is used as their entree into the alcoholism field. More subtle is the unknown fact that this individual represents the "mistakes" or failures of the respective disciplines. Alcoholism jargon is beginning to emerge that describes this type of counselor: "Ring-around-the-collar" (clergy); "Bad Habits" (nuns); "Mind-sneakers" (psychologist); "Fat Quacks" (doctors) . . . to list but a few.

TOOK-A-COURSE-COUNSELOR: Let's look at the youthful person, the university student who enters the field as a trainee on an internship program developed by the unversity. Again, we find the "took a course" example. The student acquired a "certificate" which states that he has completed a two-year course on counseling of the chemically dependent.

Now this student's interests or reasons for entering this field may be numerable. One thing is for certain – *there is no course requirement* that says he or she must do something about their own personal alcohol/drug problem. Thus, we may find "certified" counselors with personal alcohol/drug problems entering the field. The absurdity of this counselor-type is obvious. They make lousy models.

STAYING SOBER COUNSELORS: The sober alcoholic who has been active in Alcoholics Anonymous 12 Step work, who sees an opportunity to enter this field (for whatever personal reasons), may find the going a bit tough. Sobriety alone does not (in and of itself) qualify an individual as a counselor on alcoholism. *Continued*

Further, should this person enter the field in his or her early years of sobriety, they may well be courting disaster. If this person places "helping others" above his or her own personal recovery program — they are truly an accident looking for a place to happen.

Staying Sober Counselors do not work at developing internal disciplines and character strengths and ultimately will succumb under the pressures of intense relationships and risk-involvements. Ultimately they have to leave the field or they themselves will relapse.

Thus we have the basis for concern: Those who enter the alcoholism field, but cannot tolerate the stress — become the *casualties*. Those who saw counseling as a 9-to-5 job, *leave*. Those who have emotional needs and are trying to satisfy these needs through the experiences of others, *burn-out*. Those who thought they were called to this work by virtue of their sobriety alone, *relapse*. The one common denominator, is the degree to which each becomes involved in risk-taking and personal involvements: surface caring while living a contrary life-style; delving deep into anothers personal problems as an escape mechanism from one's own unresolved problems; strictly a job that pays good wages; and so on.

COUNSELORS BY EXPERIENCE AND TRAINING: Persons who become counselors on alcoholism through experience and self-teaching have a better chance of becoming a quality counselor in the field. "Counselors by Experience and Training" usually are recovered alcoholics who have practiced the A.A. principles "in all their affairs" and have developed a "forever student" attitude about their life and their role in the alcoholism field.

These persons believe in on-going learning through practical experience and through acquired academic knowledge. They may or may not have specialized training that "certifies," but they never stop studying about the subject alcoholism, about people and people's problems, or about themselves.

Counselors by experience and training are capable of *intense situational involvements*. They are capable of involvements while maintaining emotional detachment and objectivity towards others. They are capable of self-admission of ineffectiveness; i.e., "I cannot be all things to all people." They are capable of admitting prejudices and how they must work to counteract them. They fully acknowledge their value systems, beliefs and attitudes towards all. They have learned how to control their own needs and not let this interfere with the counselee's needs.

Counselors by experience and training have learned one important fact: Don't mess with another's personal life and values (beliefs) — and don't allow others to mess with yours.

These counselors know that you cannot continually tear another down, stripping him/her in an all out effort to sabotage the personality. Good counselors resist this type of confrontation and stripping.

This type of behavior in the guise of "therapy" is really only ego satisfication/gratification for the counselor who practices it; it is a perpetuation of pathological behavior/sickness on the part of the counselor; it is an attempt at character assassination of the counselee; it can be vicious, brutal, and cause irreversible damage to the individual. It is psychological warfare and sabotage of the counselee's personality strengths. It benefits no one except the counselor.

Counselors by experience and training know that only the positive approach to life that is presented with a "gentleness" is effective. This approach encompasses a faith, committment, devlopment of spiritual strengths and an embracing of all life and peoples.

Counselors by experience and training have developed an internal tolerance for stress through life's experience, knowledge and training. These persons have successful track records in the alcoholism field. They are successful because they are Counselors on Alcoholism — not counselors on marriage, religion, medicine, etc.; their object is *quality* counseling and not quantity counseling.

Counselors on Alcoholism live by a personal code of ethics; they are flexible, enthusiastic; they are "as the willow that bends with the wind" and survive because their roots are deep.

COUNSELORS ON ALCOHOLISM: Counselors come in a variety of packages. The types described here are examples of counseling "characters" present today in the field. The question arises, "What kind of counselor do we want to cultivate?" "Which model do we want to servive in the field?"

Let's list some qualities we would like to see present in a Counselor on Alcoholism:

Personal: tolerance, ability to endure, integrity, stability, loving, honest, sincere, soundness, uprightness, ingenuous, innovator, intuitiveness, inspiring, frank, open, candid, hoeful . . . .

Experience/Training: personal experience working with alcoholics, family members; personal recovery experience; practical work experience or skills; educational experiences; grooming/tutoring on the job/internship; a track record of volunteerism, or counseling experiences and training, etc. . . .

GROOMING COUNSELORS ON ALCOHOLISM: How do we then groom an individual to become a Counselor on Alcoholism? First, we must look at the person and his or her character and personality. Does he or she have any of the qualities above; to what degree?

Do they have a sincere desire, a dedication — or are they merely "looking for something to do" or "just want to help." In other words, are they looking for a job? Look more closely; is this a martyr looking for a soul to save?

When we think we have found an individual who possesses the best qualities possible, what kind of training, education or knowledge should they be given or acquire to become a Counselor on Alcoholism? Four years of university or college; attendance at a host of "schools on alcoholism studies" or "Two-year training internships"; a 90 day course; a year or more of A.A.???? What is it we should look for?

Should we look for balance in all of these areas? Or should we look for specialties of interest and areas? Should we look for individuality and forthrightness? Or should we encourage "robot" production of peer counselors? How can we test for these aptitudes and abilities? How can we insure quality performance and ethical standards?

COUNSELOR ON ALCOHOLISM POSITION: An outline of a "Counselor on Alcoholism" personnel description might be as follows:

Has personal qualities, aptitudes and abilities gleaned through practical experience. Has sought voluntary and employment opportunities that would broaden personal experiences and insight to everyday living problems, and in the field of alcoholism. Has sought and participated in academic conferences, workshops, schools, college/university courses, etc., in an endeavor to gain necessary knowledge and insight into the many facets of alcoholism and other addictive disorders. Has served in an internship position at several facilities; has gained first hand knowledge of the alcoholic and the problems of the alcoholic's family; has held a counselor position in a community agency. Has made application with this organization for the counselor position . . . .

The term COUNSELOR ON ALCOHOLISM should denote special qualities, training and experiences. The individual should endeavor to become a *general practicioner in the field of alcoholism.*

Continued

COUNSELOR

This is the chosen field . . . and no dabbling in other professional disciplines should be allowed. Standards of performance must be peer-determined and peer-evaluated; peer-enforced. Levels of competences should be tested in various working situations; i.e. counseling in treatment; halfway houses, agencies, outpatient clinics, etc.

The degree of effectiveness and ability to withstand stressful situations should be noted and perspective counselors should be cautioned against counseling in situations that necessitate intense relationships, and cautioned against counseling individuals in areas that fall outside of their chosen field, alcoholism.

Let's examine the "systems" that are cranking out these "90 day wonders." Let's make them responsible for the products of their academic programs. Let's look closer at the job descriptions that predetermines the qualities and abilities for applicants to counselor positions.

Let's look at the counselor's already in the field. Are they good models? Do they exhibit quality performance? Do they live by standards and high ethical codes of conduct? Would you seek their assistance if you were a counselee? Would you refer them to others? Ask yourself, 'What kind of track record does this person have as a counselor?'

Let's limit the use of the term "Counselor on Alcoholism." While it is true that the original meaning can never be the same — "that all Counselors on Alcoholism are recovered individuals," it can still denote a *quality* of counseling provided by the holders of the title.

SUMMARY: Rotate counselors? Yes, if it is needed to broaden the experiences and training of a counselor. But to rotate counselors to avoid the inevitable, to pass off our mistakes, from one situation to another — only serves to make us perpetrators of the worse kind and involves us in the exercise of sick ego building. Rotation will only delay momentarily the predictable burn-outs, relapses, and causalties of our field. This is a "flight" mechanism. Not a solution for grooming quality counselors for our field.

We need to fight. Weed our garden, fertilize the soil and look for conditions that will produce better crops of future counselors. And if our own counseling background needs to be overhalued, if we have been slip-shod and unethical in our practices . . . let's take a much needed inventory of ourselves. Then comes decision time...clean house or move out of the field. Better to move on than to burn, Baby!